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SUBJECT: RUSSIAN FAR EAST FISHING: THE NORTH KOREAN CONNECTION

¶1. (U) Summary. Fishing is often said to be the most criminalized industry in the Russian Far East. After several months of planning, one small fishing company in Zarubino agreed to allow the CG and one FSN to accompany the trawler MPC 254 on a fishing trip in Peter the Great Bay. While the August 5 fishing expedition may not have been entirely typical, it did provide a glimpse into the opaque world of Far Eastern fishing and the fish processing that is accomplished with the help of contract North Korean laborers. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Even Primorskiy Krai Governor Darkin admits that the Russian Fishing Industry is hampered by poaching and illegal exports. He has warned that Kamchatkan crab will disappear and he's outlined the economic harm done to Russia when Russian boats simply offload seafood in Korea, Japan or China without processing in Russia. The industry does have some economic advantages. Low wages for employees, a low-tech fishing fleet that is not capital intensive, and still relatively healthy stocks of some types of fish. Importing North Korean laborers also keeps the costs of Russian seafood low. But to compete in the world market, Russia will have to show that the industry is sustainable. This short fishing excursion revealed an industry that is far from the world standard.

ABOARD THE TRAWLER MPC 254  
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¶3. (U) The expedition got underway early in the morning with the Captain pointing out the fishing grounds on his chart and the most likely place to find the bottom fish they were after. In the corner of this local maritime map is the Russian-North Korean border at the river Tyumen. The trip took place north of the border. Always in sight of land, the 22 meter boat cruised through the southern most stretch of Russian territory. Zarubino is 6,400 kilometers from Moscow, but just 600 kilometers from Pyongyang. The rusty ship was built in 1984 and probably has not been painted since, but it seemed seaworthy. The Captain was asked how many crew members he needed. He laughed and said "six; today we have five." Indeed, the lack of manpower hurt the boat later on.

¶4. (U) Most of the crew were quite experienced. There was a dog on board too that knew the ship inside and out. One sailor had 35 years on the water, with the tattoos on his fingers and elsewhere to prove it. Crew members confirmed that their pay depended on the day's catch, but no one would volunteer what percentage they made on the profits. Everyone agreed that the salaries were low and part of the reason for the Russian fishing fleet being chronically short staffed. The North Korean laborers, while inexpensive, always stay on shore.

PICKLES AND WAVES DON'T MIX  
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¶5. (U) The crew did their best to keep the Consulate staff comfortable and safe. A strong swell from the south from a previous storm made the going less than smooth. When one staffer got seasick, he was offered the Russian folk remedy of a pickle, the sight of which had an immediate effect on the sea sick passenger.

¶6. (U) By mid-morning, in 40 meters of water, the sonar showed some promising blips. The Captain ordered the nets over the

stern. For the next 90 minutes the lines and nets went out while the boat circled. The nets finally came up with crabs and starfish first that were entangled in the netting. Then the bulk of the catch came up with a dripping tentacled arm of an octopus wriggling out of the netting. The crew pulled the net in and began sorting the crab, flounder, cod, pollock, octopus, and kelp. One starfish the size of a garbage can went overboard. The crab, while economically profitable, is banned. The crew is allowed, nevertheless, to keep two percent of any banned fish, so several crabs were kept for lunch. In general, there was very little bycatch, one of the environmental challenges facing bigger fishing boats. Almost everything caught was used. That said, all trash, including plastic bottles, cans of cooking oil and cigarette packs, went over the side without a moment's hesitation. The Captain reported once dredging up the hull of a Toyota in his nets. Trash is often confused on the sonar for fish.

#### THE CATCH -----

17. (U) The catch was disappointingly small, which the Captain blamed on not having enough crew to operate the nets properly. In general, the Captain was satisfied with the direction of the Russian fishing industry. He said poaching is becoming less of a problem. We saw on shore however a cache of scallop shells. The locals are fond of saying the shells are the size of dinner plates, and they were indeed quite large. Apparently scuba divers collect the shells, take out the meat, and dump the shells on shore. The meat can then be hidden onboard ship and packaged for the black market. The Russian Border Guards are reportedly more active than in past years. An inspection, while not welcome, is thorough, lasting over two hours. The Captain was fined one thousand rubles last week for not declaring a new crewmember on his log book. But poachers do hurt business and everyone wants their cut. On shore, two local militia were waiting for the boat and asked for "sponsorship" by way of a few free fish. They were accommodated.

#### THE NORTH KOREAN CONNECTION -----

18. (U) Once ashore the fish are sorted again. Some fish are ground and frozen, destined to be used for cattle and pig feed. In the plant in Zarubino 16 North Korean women and ten North Korean men work the conveyor belts and sort and prepare fish. The women got higher marks than the men for productivity. According to the plant manager, though, overall the North Koreans are not as efficient as Russian workers - but they are a lot cheaper. The North Koreans have a November - June contract that can be extended. They have been in Zarubino for at least the last three years. They live in dormitories within walking distance to the plant. The dorms seem no better or worse than the local housing overall. The North Koreans do not speak Russian but have an interpreter who is also the foreman of the group. He was better dressed and is apparently better paid. The plant manager contradicted the ship Captain, who had insisted that all fish caught are consumed domestically, saying some of the seafood is exported to South Korea.

19. (U) Comment: The Russian fishing industry has a long way to go to modernize. Fishing company directors told us that they are not even considering new equipment, although they do rely on American GPS devices. New ships, however, for now, are out of the question. The industry may not be transparent and it may be criminalized, but if anyone is getting rich in the industry, it is certainly not the fisherman on board the MPC 254. At the end of the trip we ate the octopus, crab and sea urchins with wasabi and soy sauce. While all of the seafood would fetch higher prices in nearby Asian markets, we were repeatedly assured that they only sell to Russian customers. Of course, fishermen are known to exaggerate.